

Parliament of Victoria

‘Surely it would be a good thing’: Women in the Victorian Parliament

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Introduction

In 1923, Victoria was the only Australian state that did not allow women to stand for Parliament. From 1908, all women—other than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women—were able to vote in Legislative Assembly elections, and those who met the eligibility requirements could vote in Legislative Council elections. However, the use of ‘male person’ and ‘he’ in the *Constitution Act Amendment Act 1915*, in reference to eligibility to be a Member of Parliament, prevented women from being candidates at elections themselves.¹

This changed with the passing of the *Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Act* in 1923, which allowed Alicia Katz to stand for Parliament as an Australian Labor Party candidate for Barwon at the 1924 election. While Alicia Katz did not win her seat, and it took another nine years for a woman to be elected to Victoria’s parliament, the current 60th Parliament has equal numbers of men and women. At the 2022 state election, more women than men were elected to the Legislative Council.

In celebration of the 100th anniversary of these events, this paper provides an overview of the debates that led to legislative change and a summary of Alicia Katz’s experience as Victoria’s first female state-election candidate.

1 | Who could stand for Parliament in 1923?

In the *Constitution Act Amendment Act 1915*, there were different eligibility requirements for the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council. For the Legislative Council, the Act stated that:

47. Any male person who—
- a) is of the full age of thirty years; and
 - b) is a natural born subject of His Majesty; or, if not a natural-born subject of His Majesty has been naturalized for ten years previously to such election and has resided in Victoria during that period; and
 - c) has for one year previously to such election been legally or equitably seised of or entitled to an estate of freehold in possession for his own use and benefit in lauds or tenements in Victoria of the annual value of Fifty pounds' above all charges and incumbrances affecting the same other than any public or parliamentary tax or municipal or other rate or assessment—
- shall be capable of being elected a member of the Council.
- Provided that—
- a) no judge of any court in Victoria;
 - b) no minister of religion whatever may be his rank or title or designation; and
 - c) no person who has been attainted of any treason or convicted of any felony or infamous offence within any part of His Majesty's dominions or who is an uncertificated bankrupt or insolvent—
- shall be capable of being elected or continuing to be a member of the Council.²

For the Legislative Assembly, the qualification for Members was included in section 133:

Any natural-born subject of His Majesty, or any alien naturalized by law for the space of five years and resident in Victoria for the space of two years, who is of the full age of twenty-one years, shall be qualified to be elected a member of the Assembly, provided he is not subject to any of the disabilities created by The Constitution Act or by this or any other Act and not removed, by this Act.³

The inclusion of ‘male person’ and ‘he’ in these sections excluded women from eligibility.

¹ *The Constitution Act Amendment Act 1915*

² *ibid.*, s 47.

³ *ibid.*, s 133.

2 | *Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Act 1923*

On 27 September 1921, James Disney, Member for Melbourne West province in the Legislative Council, introduced the Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill. He introduced the private member's bill because he 'honestly believe[d] in equal rights for men and women' and thought that 'it was probably an oversight on the part of those who drafted the Constitution that the word "he" slipped in, and the word "she" was omitted'.⁴

The Bill did not make broad changes to the Constitution Act. Clause 2 made two small changes. The first change meant that:

... no woman shall by reason only of sex or marriage be disqualified or disabled from or be incapable of being a candidate at any election ... or being elected ... or sitting or voting therein if elected.⁵

The second repealed the word 'male' from section 47 of the Constitution Act Amendment Act 1927. This meant that the section on eligibility for the Legislative Council began with 'Any person who', rather than 'Any male person who'.⁶

While the Bill did have majority support in the Legislative Council, it did not have enough votes to reach the super majority required to amend the Constitution.⁷ It took Disney another two attempts to steer the Bill through both houses.

On 26 September 1922, the Bill passed the Legislative Council but did not pass the Legislative Assembly. Although it was introduced to the Legislative Assembly the day after it passed in the Council, the debate was adjourned several times until it was defeated on 15 December, right at the end of the parliamentary session. During the debate in the Legislative Assembly, Richard Toutcher, Member for Stawell and Ararat, said 'a matter of such importance deserves better consideration than it can possibly receive in a thin House at the hours of 4am'.⁸ While the Assembly did divide on the second reading, it did not achieve the absolute majority required. Some Members were reported to be unhappy with the attempt to pass the Bill so near the end of the session without proper time for debate, and it was implied that the timing of the Bill at the end of the session was in part the reason for the lack of an absolute majority.⁹

On 15 August 1923, Disney introduced the Bill for a third and final time. This time, there was not a lot of debate on the Bill in either chamber before the third readings.¹⁰ Having been through the Council, it finally passed the Legislative Assembly, with little opposition, early in the morning of 14 December 1923.¹¹

⁴ J. H. Disney (1921) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 25 October, p. 626; J. H. Disney (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 6 September, p. 1117.

⁵ *Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill 1923*, cl 2(1).

⁶ *ibid.*, cl 2(2).

⁷ Victoria, Legislative Council (1921) 'Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, Session 1921, 26 October, pp. 30–31.

⁸ R. F. Toutcher (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 15 December, p. 4196; Victoria, Legislative Assembly (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly*, 15 December, p. 126. On this day, the house adjourned at twenty-three minutes past five o'clock in the morning (p. 126).

⁹ W. H. Everard (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 15 December, p. 4196.

¹⁰ Victoria, Legislative Council (1923) 'Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, Session 1923–4, 26 October, p. 48.

¹¹ (1923) 'Quiet Early Morning Victory in Assembly', *The Herald*, 14 December; (1923) 'Women in Parliament: Removal of the ban in Victoria', *The Age*, 15 December; (1922) 'Women in State Parliament: Bill passed by Council', *The Age*, 27 September.

The Bill was reserved by the Governor on 22 December 1923, received royal assent on 21 March 1924 and was gazetted on 12 May 1924.¹²

Debate in the chambers

The following section will highlight some of the themes which arose during the second reading debates. Many Members expressed the same arguments in favour of and against women joining them in the parliamentary chambers. Some of these are outlined below.

'Woman's influence helps to raise the standard in every sphere she enters': Increasing the standard of behaviour in the chamber

Many Members expressed the view that, if women were present in the chamber, the standard of behaviour among Members would be raised. Disney explained that having a woman on the Richmond City Council:

... had a very good influence, because some of the councillors used to lose their tempers, and there was a good deal of wrangling. Since the advent of this lady the whole proceedings have been improved. If the presence of ladies at municipal council meetings has a good effect, surely it would be a good thing if we had a few ladies in this Chamber.¹³

He also expressed the hope that, if women were elected Members of Parliament:

... we should not have had debates such as the one last night which seemed to be a bit unpleasant for the Minister. Probably the presence of the ladies would have a steadying effect on the male legislators. When we are in trouble we usually run to women for advice.¹⁴

Henry Cohen, Member for Melbourne province, and William Edgar, Member for East Yarra province, were in agreement with Disney.¹⁵ Edgar said that 'woman's influence helps to raise the standard in every sphere she enters'.¹⁶

Several members referred to Queen Victoria's reign as one of peace. Horace Richardson, Member for South Western province, called her the 'best sovereign the British Empire has ever had—a woman'.¹⁷ John Harris, Member for North Eastern province, argued that during her reign, Queen Victoria relied on male counsellors, not female, and as such this argument was not as influential as other Members may have wished it to be.¹⁸

¹² Victoria, Legislative Assembly (1924) 'Assent to Bills: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 30 April, p. 3380; Victoria, Legislative Assembly (1923) 'Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly*, Session 1923–24, p. 116; A. Peacock, Premier (1924) 'Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 13 May, p. 3551; Victorian Government (1924) *Victoria Government Gazette*, no. 104, 12 May. Before 1986, certain categories of Bills were 'reserved' for royal assent by the sovereign, not the Governor. See: K. Murray (2008) 'Royal Assent in Victoria', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Spring, 23(2), pp. 41–65.

¹³ Disney (1921) *op. cit.*, p. 627.

¹⁴ Disney (1922) *op. cit.*, p. 1117.

¹⁵ H. I. Cohen (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 706; W. H. Edgar (1921) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 6 September, p. 1120.

¹⁶ W. H. Edgar (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, p. 1120.

¹⁷ H. F. Richardson (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 6 September, p. 1118.

¹⁸ Disney (1922) *op. cit.*, pp. 1115–6; H. F. Richardson (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 6 September, p. 1118.

'No use trying to keep them down': Allowing women to stand is a matter of equality

As most Victorian women had been eligible to vote in at least the Legislative Assembly elections since 1908, in 1924 some Members expressed that it was unfair that they could not also stand for parliament. Disney believed:

The women are in our community considerably in excess of the men ... As Democrats, we all believe in majority rule. The women are in the majority, and they should have a chance of being directly represented in Parliament.¹⁹

He also stated:

It is a remarkable thing that we allow women to vote at elections, but will not allow them to contest seats for Parliament. As they are considered competent to vote, they should be made eligible for election.²⁰

Harris did not believe that each vote was equal, asserting that women 'do not pretend to know anything about politics, and the vast majority are advised by their husband'.²¹ Russell Clarke, Member for Southern province, disagreed with Harris and said:

I think the world is moving on, and that at present women are as much interested in politics as men are, and that there can be no harm in giving many women of great minds an opportunity of coming in here, and sharing the responsibility with the men.²²

James Merritt, Member for East Yarra province, reflected on the roles that women stepped into during World War One and said that 'it is no use trying to keep them down, and there is no reason why we should attempt to do so'.²³ He stated that he had not heard one 'convincing argument' as to why women should be barred from parliament.²⁴ John Jones, Member for Melbourne East province, was steadfast in his argument, stating:

It appears to me that no arguments are needed. Women have the right to sit in almost every Parliament in the world, although it is true that hitherto they have not exercised that right to any extent. That is largely due to the fact that in the past women have not been engaged so much in political and economic activities as men. We know, however, that the place of woman in the industrial and economic field is being changed, and that she is taking more responsibilities and subscribing more to the activities of life.²⁵

Cohen believed that 'it is a matter of justice and consistency' and, along with Francis Old, Member for Swan Hill, believed that Victoria should change the law to align with the other states.²⁶

Esmond Keirnan, Member for Melbourne North province, asked, 'why should [women] be looked on as frivolous and brainless, and unfitted for public life? In common sense, I regard women as being of quite as good a calibre as ourselves'.²⁷ He refuted the claims of other Members who believed that some women were not fit for public work, stating that some men are also not fit for public office.²⁸

¹⁹ Disney (1921) op. cit., p. 627; Disney (1922) op. cit., p. 1116.

²⁰ Disney (1921) op. cit., p. 702.

²¹ J. R. Harris (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 6 September, p. 1119.

²² W. L. R. Clarke (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 6 September, p. 1119.

²³ J. K. Merritt (1921) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 705.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ J. P. Jones (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 6 September, p. 1117.

²⁶ H. I. Cohen (1921) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 706; F. Old (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 15 December, p. 4197.

²⁷ E. Kiernan (1921) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 707.

²⁸ *ibid.*

Clarke thought that women 'would be able to carry them out in a splendid manner and that they would benefit the country by being members of parliament'.²⁹ Old in 1922 talked about how Victoria was the only state without these rights for women.³⁰

The Premier and Member for Castlemaine and Maldon, Harry Lawson, was in favour of the Bill, stating that 'we have a precedent in the great Mother of Parliaments', referring to the UK Parliament, where women had been able to stand for election since 1918.³¹ Others were more circumspect. Alexander Bell, Member for Wellington province, believed that the Bill was a 'step in the right direction',³² and William Crockett, Member for North Western province, stated that women should not be stopped from being a Member of Parliament if they so desired.³³ While Richardson said that he was voting for the Bill, he did 'not know that many women would take advantage of the opportunity', but saw 'no reason why they should not have it', especially as the parliament had to deal with issues that impact women more than men.³⁴

'... You find that she is not satisfied that men can legislate for her ...': Women could legislate about issues affecting women and children better than men

Many Members believed that women were better placed to create laws about issues they saw as being more in the 'woman's domain'. Disney stated that women being in parliament would assist other women, such as those who are heads of their families, as they would introduce Bills that would help them and 'put the case for such legislation convincingly'.³⁵

During the 1921 debate, Edgar believed that having women in parliament would mean 'matters affecting the home would receive greater consideration from women than from men', and that 'if you speak to the ordinary woman on the subject, you find that she is not satisfied that men can legislate for her and her children as satisfactorily as women could do'.³⁶ He believed that while the Bill might not be passed on this attempt, 'important reforms have been given legal effect to on less consideration than this measure is receiving'.³⁷ Cohen viewed the different backgrounds of current Members of the chamber as a positive, and highlighted that 'it would be an advantage to any assembly to have among its members women who can properly represent the views of women'.³⁸

Frederick Brawn, Member for Wellington province, held the opposing view, that men could legislate for women and children just as well as women.³⁹ He was concerned that parliament would 'get the type [of woman] we do not want', but he would be happy to serve with a 'womanly woman sitting with her husband ascertain[ing] what legislation should be'.⁴⁰

William Baillieu, Member for Northern province, voted against the Bill in 1921:

... not because I think that a woman is an ineligible person, but because I do not think we will improve the position at all by allowing them to become members of Parliament. I doubt whether in granting the parliamentary franchise to women we have altered very much the

²⁹ Clarke (1922) op cit., p. 1119.

³⁰ Old (1922) op. cit., p. 4197.

³¹ H. Lawson (1922) '[Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections \(Women Candidates\) Bill](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 15 December, p. 4196; UK Parliament (no date) '[Women in the House of Commons](#)', UK Parliament website.

³² A. Bell (1921) '[Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections \(Women Candidates\) Bill](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 710.

³³ W. P. Crockett (1921) '[Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections \(Women Candidates\) Bill](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 710.

³⁴ Richardson (1922) op. cit., p. 1118.

³⁵ Disney (1921) op. cit., p. 627.

³⁶ W. H. Edgar (1921) '[Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections \(Women Candidates\) Bill](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 704.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Cohen (1921) op. cit., p. 706.

³⁹ F. W. Brawn (1921) '[Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections \(Women Candidates\) Bill](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 704.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 705.

stamp of man returned to Parliament. I do not think the proposal to make women eligible for Parliament is going to make our position any better'.⁴¹

He did state that 'any proposal which concerns the welfare of women will be supported every time by the men in this house', to which Kiernan objected, 'We do not understand their position'.⁴²

In the 1922 debate, Disney used the example of Mary Rogers's involvement as a committee member on an inquiry regarding boarded-out children, and stated that he knew firsthand that the committee's recommendations had made positive impacts on the lives of the children.⁴³ He indicated again that he believed that men would not be 'displaced' by having women in parliament; rather, that women would legislate better for children.⁴⁴ Arthur Robinson, Member for Melbourne South province and the Attorney-General, however, believed that 'having women in parliamentary life had not been a success'.⁴⁵

'I do not believe women had asked for it, or that they require it': Women are not interested in entering parliament

Some Members did not believe that women were interested in standing for parliament. Brawn believed that most women would vote as told by their husbands, and so there would be little point in them also having a seat in parliament.⁴⁶ Others, such as William Angliss, Member for Southern province, and George Goudie, Member for North Western province, said that they had not heard women advocating for a seat in parliament, and Alfred Chandler, Member for South Eastern province, believed that if all women were polled, a majority would be against women entering parliament.⁴⁷ Chandler did vote in favour of the amendments, however, so as to ensure consistency with allowing women to vote.⁴⁸

Harris thought that only 'the woman who has missed her true vocation in life who ever aspires to anything else but adorning her home and rearing her family'⁴⁹ would want to enter parliament.⁵⁰ Harris stated that he would 'record the vote as if [his wife] were voting', as she did not wish to enter parliament.⁵¹

While Disney, who introduced the private member's bill, was supportive of the Bill in general, he did say that 'the women who desire to become members of Parliament would never bother about this house', referring to the Legislative Council.⁵² As the Legislative Council had further qualifications for eligibility, it could be assumed that he did not believe that many women would meet these eligibility requirements and therefore it was unlikely they would stand in the upper house.

Robertson was sceptical of whether having women in parliament would make any difference, asking, 'After all, what has been done by ladies who have succeeded in getting into Parliament?'.⁵³

⁴¹ W. Baillieu (1921) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 708.

⁴² *ibid.*; Kiernan, (1921) *op. cit.*, p. 708.

⁴³ Disney (1922) *op. cit.*, p. 1115.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 1116.

⁴⁵ A. Robinson (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 6 September, p. 1117.

⁴⁶ Brawn (1921) *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ W. C. Angliss (1921) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 709; G. L. Goudie (1921) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 709–10; A. E. Chandler (1921) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 709.

⁴⁸ Chandler (1921) *op. cit.*, p. 709.

⁴⁹ Harris (1922) *op. cit.*, p. 1118.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 1119.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Disney (1921) *op. cit.*, p. 709.

⁵³ Robertson (1922) 'Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 15 December, p. 4196.

'Did you ever see them playing hockey?': Coping with the rigours of parliament

Members expressed concern that women's constitutions would not be able to cope with the late nights and other stresses required to stand as a Member. Disney was not concerned about women's stamina, stating that:

Whenever I go to a special function where ladies are present the long hours do not trouble them, and I suppose it would be the same if they were in this House. An all-night sitting would not frighten them. I believe they would have a steadying effect on us, that we would be very careful what we said, and that we would talk sense.⁵⁴

He also reminded Members that women were often up late at night dealing with unwell family members. He refuted the President of the Women's National League, Mrs Hughes, who had stated that women could not cope with the long hours.⁵⁵ The quote used as the heading of this section comes from an interjection from an unnamed Member that illustrates the opposing views on women's stamina:

Disney: ... for I believe they have proved themselves well able to stand the wear and tear of a strenuous life just as well as, if not better than, men.

An Honourable Member: Did you ever see them playing hockey?

Disney: No, but I have often seen them playing bowls.⁵⁶

Robinson stated that his opposition to the Bill was based on the fact that 'the excitement of political struggles would be a great strain on her nervous system'.⁵⁷ He went on to state that he was further concerned with the 'hard knocks' that women would be subjected to in parliament, and doubted that 'the feminine nature is capable of standing up to such a strenuous life'.⁵⁸ He stated that his opposition was 'purely sentimental', and that it would not be an advantage to either sex or parliament for women to be in parliament.⁵⁹

'Nature has constructed woman to adorn the home': Women would neglect their duties in the home

Many Members expressed their concerns about women overlooking their duties at home in favour of sitting in parliament. Robinson was concerned with the 'growing disinclination to take on the responsibilities of family life', calling it 'one of the most serious problems facing society at present'.⁶⁰ He believed that becoming a Member of Parliament would make women even more disinclined to have a family.

William Kendell, Member for North Eastern province, believed that 'women are neglecting their first duties in connection with children and the bringing up of families, when they push their way into things which have been hitherto conducted by men' and that they would not be very good candidates.⁶¹

In 1921, Harris was 'sitting on a rail' with his vote and argued that 'women rule the world at the present time', as they had such an influence on the home and family life. But he also believed women are happiest when they are looking after children and that they should be encouraged to continue that work.⁶² In 1922, Harris stated that 'nature has constructed

⁵⁴ Disney (1921) op. cit., p. 627.

⁵⁵ Disney (1922) op. cit., p. 1115.

⁵⁶ J. H. Disney (1923) '[Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections \(Women Candidates\) Bill](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 15 August, p. 800.

⁵⁷ A. Robinson (1921) '[Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections \(Women Candidates\) Bill](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 703.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Kendell (1921) '[Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections \(Women Candidates\) Bill](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, pp. 705–6.

⁶² Harris (1921) '[Second reading speech: Parliamentary Elections \(Women Candidates\) Bill](#)', *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 26 October, p. 708.

woman to adorn the home' and argued that 'most women do not think of anything else but her home and her babies'.⁶³

3 | Women's groups' responses to the Bill

Throughout the parliamentary debate, Victorian newspapers reported on various women's groups' views on the possibility of women being able to stand for parliament, and their responses when it did pass.

The Australian National Women's League, the precursor to the women's section of the Liberal Party, discussed the issue at its 17th annual national conference in Melbourne in 1921.⁶⁴ President Mrs F. G. Hughes stated that, while 'the league many years ago advocated that the legal status of women should be raised to that of men', in her opinion, 'Parliament itself, as at present constitutes no place for a woman'.⁶⁵ Hughes stated that the length of sitting days and the 'acrimonious debate' in the chambers had led her to this conclusion. She proposed that, rather than women joining parliament, a 'women's council' should be formed and 'duly and constitutionally recognised by Parliament'.⁶⁶ This council would be conducted according to parliamentary standing orders and would focus in particular on the 'study and consideration' of Bills relating to women and children, such as housing, charities, sanitation and philanthropic work. Women's attention to detail would be particularly useful for furthering these agendas, she stated.⁶⁷

At the same meeting of the National Women's League, *The Age* reported that Premier Harry Lawson said:

... some women were not suitable and would not be able to do legislative work; others might be qualified. Yet he thought women's best work was not to be done in Parliament ... He saw no reason why women should not have a chance of electing such women representatives if they so wished.⁶⁸

At the League's 1922 annual conference, a vote to remove the statement that members 'do not wish to send women into Parliament' from the preamble to its constitution was defeated 140 votes to 10.⁶⁹

In October 1923, Mrs Hughes again expressed her desire for a women's committee to help guide parliament, saying: 'Women could bring forward better arguments in a more effective way than men, but men were more forceful and that sense of tolerance kept women silent'.⁷⁰ Other League members had voiced their support for women in parliament. A Mrs Kelly said that 'men had run the world to date and had made a terrible failure of it'.⁷¹ Mrs Berry argued that women should serve an unpaid 'apprenticeship' in municipal councils before entering state parliament.⁷²

In September 1921, at the annual conference of the National Federation, a Mr Flintoft of the South Yarra branch moved a motion that it was 'undesirable' for women to be elected. Mrs Whitlam, when talking on Flintoft's motion, said:

... the time for debate on the question had gone long ago, and the mover had evidently been asleep. If anyone wanted a demonstration of the necessity of women being elected to

⁶³ Harris (1922) op. cit., p. 1118.

⁶⁴ C. Land & J. Carey (2018) 'Australian Women's National League', The Australian Women's Register website.

⁶⁵ (1921) 'Women's National League Parliamentary Reform: Problem of the cheap loaf', *The Argus*, 12 October.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ (1921) 'Women in public life. Premier's Opinion. The Recent Elections', *The Age*, 13 October, p. 8.

⁶⁹ (1922) 'Women and elections: Branches must organise', *The Herald*, 3 October, p. 5.

⁷⁰ (1923) 'Women in Parliament. Advisory Council idea, Women's National League', *The Argus*, 10 October, p. 7.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² *ibid.*

Parliament they had only to go to the State Parliament and see the dead old men trying to deal with the registration of midwifery nurses.⁷³

The motion from the South Yarra delegation was defeated and a resolution from the Parkville branch to urge changes to enable women to stand for parliament was 'carried, with acclamation'.⁷⁴

In 1921, the Housewives Association of Victoria 'emphatically claim[ed] that the time is more than ripe for the immediate amendment of the Electoral Act, to enable women to be represented in the State Parliament'.⁷⁵ The president of the association allayed fears that women would want to be presented with seats, stating that they should be elected like the men. That jurisdictions allowing women to stand for parliament had not elected them in large numbers showed 'that there is no danger of any revolutionary change or sudden innovation, from giving to women the right of candidature for parliament', said the president. The association argued that allowing women to stand for parliament is about more than just women having the 'same right of citizenship as men'; it would also be beneficial to society to have women's input.⁷⁶

At a 1922 meeting of the Victorian Housewives' Association, the president Mrs Glencross announced 'that steps would shortly be taken to call a conference of all the women's organisations interested to discuss ways and means of securing the direct representation of women in Parliament'.⁷⁷

In September 1922, the Victorian Women's Citizens' Movement led a deputation to the Premier on the issue.⁷⁸ The president, Mrs Jones, told a meeting in 1923 that 'the chief bar to the acceptance of women as members of the Victorian Parliament is the apathy of women themselves'.⁷⁹ Mr L. Twigg Patterson, secretary of the Australian Legion, told the group that leaving women out of eligibility for the House of Assembly was 'merely a mistake of draftsmanship'.⁸⁰ A resolution urging the government to pass the Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Bill was moved and the decision to form a deputation to 'wait upon the Premier' was made.⁸¹

After the Bill passed parliament, the Australasian president of the Housewives' Association, Mrs Andrew, said:

I am quite sure last night's vote will bring joy to the ears of every progressive woman and particularly when they know there is so much to be done in the interests of home life, child welfare and for women generally ... We feel sure that nothing else to-day will meet the needs of the people except equality of status, with women standing side by side with men, each working and pulling together for their mutual welfare and that of the State.⁸²

In response to the passing of the Bill, Mrs James Booth told *The Age*, 'It is a very belated act of justice ... Victoria in politics has been a comparative backwater in regard to allowing women full citizens' rights'.⁸³ Dr Edith Barrett of the National Council of Women told *The Herald* she was 'Very glad. We've fought for it long enough'.⁸⁴ Mr G. A. Moir, President of the Federal Council of the Australian Natives Association, said the association 'naturally is in

⁷³ (1921) 'National Federation. Women in Parliament', *The Argus*, 16 September, p. 8; (1921) 'Women in Parliament. An animated discussion', *The Age*, 16 September, p. 7.

⁷⁴ (1921) 'Women in Parliament. An animated discussion', *The Age*, 16 September, p. 7.

⁷⁵ (1921) 'Women in Parliament', *The Herald*, 16 July, p. 4.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ (1922) 'Women in Parliament', *The Age*, 10 March, p. 10.

⁷⁸ (1923) 'Women in Parliament. Removal of the ban in Victoria', *The Age*, 15 December, p. 17; (1923) 'Women in Parliament: Deputation to Premier', *The Ballarat Star*, 26 September, p. 6.

⁷⁹ (1923) 'Women and the Legislature', *The Argus*, 4 September, p. 6.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² (1923) 'Women in Parliament. Removal of the ban in Victoria', *The Age*, 15 December, p. 17.

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ (1923) 'Women in Parliament. Quiet Early Morning Victoria in Assembly. Hesitant Member. Comedy of Last-Minute Change of Mind', *The Herald*, 14 December, p. 1.

favor of removal of all restrictions against women in Parliament. To say that woman should not be in Parliament is most illogical’.⁸⁵

By June 1924, a fund had been established by the president of the Victorian Women’s Citizens’ Movement, Mrs John Jones, to support women who were standing for parliament.⁸⁶

4 | Alicia Katz and the 1924 election

The first woman to be pre-selected as a major party’s candidate at a Victorian election was Alicia Katz. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) pre-selected her as candidate for the seat of Barwon ahead of the 1924 election. When reflecting on the election, *The Age* wrote that, ‘in spite of warning very little preparation was made for the advent of this election, and when it actually arrived the women who realised the opportunity was at hand found it was too late to start organising a campaign’.⁸⁷ The tight timeframe between the Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Act receiving royal assent and the proroguing of parliament may explain why more women were not nominated.

Background and early career

Alicia Katz was born Elisia Johannah Watkins on 1 July 1876 in North Melbourne. Katz’s father James Austin Watkins was an engineer from Monmouthshire, Wales. He had arrived in Australia with his parents in 1867 and married Anne (Annie) Farley from County Meath, Ireland, in 1872. Katz’s older brother James Elias Watkins was born in 1873.⁸⁸

There is little information on Katz’s life until she married Frederick Carl Katz, in 1900. Frederick was born in Adelaide to German immigrant Carl August Katz and Jane Wilshire. Frederick and Alicia had one child, a daughter named Olive Amame, born in 1901.

Both Katz and her husband were active in the Victorian socialist movement, with their speeches often being reported on in the newspapers. In the 9 October 1908 edition of *The Socialist*, she was described as ‘the best speaker, but one, of all the women heard during the last twenty years in Victoria’.⁸⁹ Later that year she received an ‘outburst’ of applause ‘after a peroration which stirred all hearts and inspired with its confidence and courage.’⁹⁰ In 1911, the family moved to Tasmania for Frederick to work as an organiser for the Carters’ Union. They returned to the mainland in 1914.⁹¹

During World War One, both were outspoken opponents of conscription and campaigned for peace.⁹² Frederick, who was of German descent and had a German name, was set upon by returned soldiers in 1915 and tarred and feathered.⁹³ Katz was a member of the Women’s Peace Army and was involved with the Women’s Central Organising Committee (WCOC), part of the ALP—even serving as its president.⁹⁴ In 1922, she successfully moved that the secretary of the WCOC be paid.⁹⁵

At a meeting of the Women’s Peace Army in 1915, she moved a motion (seconded by Amelia Pankhurst) that ‘urged the Governments of the world to put an end to this bloodshed’, and added ‘That women should be granted equal political rights with men ... and asked (the

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ (1924) ‘Of interest to women’, *The Australasian*, 28 June, p. 48.

⁸⁷ (1924) ‘Women and the elections’, *The Age*, 1 July, p. 6.

⁸⁸ J. Ravis (1988) *Alicia Katz: The first attempt*, Box Hill North, League of Women Voters of Victoria, p. 4.

⁸⁹ (1908) ‘The Movement: Propaganda Meetings’, *The Socialist*, 9 October, p. 2.

⁹⁰ (1908) ‘At the Bijou: Mrs Katz strikes cleverly and hard’, *The Socialist*, 11 December, p. 6.

⁹¹ Ravis (1988) *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹³ (1915) ‘Katz tarred and feathered’, *Daily Mercury*, 23 December, p. 4.

⁹⁴ (1921) ‘Women’s Central Organising Committee’, *Labor Call*, 17 March, p. 10; (1919) ‘Australian Labor Party. Women’s Central Organising Committee.’ *Labor Call*, 23 October, p. 5; (1922) ‘Labor women: Forward step in Victoria’, *Westralian Worker*, 5 May, p. 6.

⁹⁵ Ravis (1988) *op. cit.*, p. 7.

Prime Minister) to give Australian women direct representation in the council that is to be formed to consider the terms of peace’.⁹⁶

Katz was involved in the prohibition debate, which brought her into conflict with the broader Australian Labor Party. In 1923, she was censured for taking ‘an active part upon the public platform or public press, upon the vexed question of the drink traffic’.⁹⁷

Katz was praised for her speaking abilities. *The Australian Worker* stated that her ‘speaking capacity is excellent, in the quiet and cultured way, and she invariably gains the ear of her audience at a conference, be it of men or of women, or of both’.⁹⁸ In 1908, *The Socialist* said, ‘It is scarcely fair to a thoroughly good speaker to have to take up the task of holding an audience after Mrs Katz has addressed it’.⁹⁹

Both Frederick and Alicia Katz became more involved in the ALP throughout the late 1910s and early 1920s. Fred stood in 1921 for the seat of Warrnambool. In the *Warrnambool Standard* on 20 August 1921, Katz was quoted as highlighting ‘the necessity for the wise exercise of the vote for women whose interests economically and from a domestic standpoint, depended largely on the progress of the Labor Movement’.¹⁰⁰

1924 state election

Katz was nominated for the seat of Barwon as a Labor candidate in the 1924 election. The election was held on 26 June, though the Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Act was only gazetted on 12 May.¹⁰¹ Katz’s nomination occurred before royal assent.

Katz began her campaign at Sladen Hall, Chilwell, on 3 June 1924. During the campaign she spoke on many topics, including seat redistributions, decentralisation and free education, and the welfare of women and children—including unmarried mothers, working mothers and disabled children.¹⁰² She also opposed the law requiring women to take their husbands’ nationality.¹⁰³ Frank Anstey, former ALP Member for Brunswick and William Maloney, Member for Melbourne in the House of Representatives, both supported her on her campaign.¹⁰⁴ Katz also spoke about how she was standing not as a female candidate, but as a Labor candidate.

One speech was summarised by *The Horsham Times*:

... she questioned whether all that women wanted to do was to marry, have children and become ideal housewives. Personally she wanted to do her duty as a wife and mother, but she wanted to do more than that. She thought that women could marry and have children and still take part in the life of the nation, and not be any less a wife and mother.¹⁰⁵

She called for women to use their vote to assist women—and especially children—telling one gathering:

I want one prejudice to be broken down. That is this: It does not follow that because woman is a wife and mother her whole activity should be restricted to housework. For instance, the rearing of children depends on their environment. An intelligent mother must use her vote and her influence in setting up better living conditions for the community, so that when her children go out into the world they will be safeguarded from some of the social evils now existing through women in the past having no say in the making of laws.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹⁸ (1930) ‘Mrs. Katz’, *The Australian Worker*, 2 April, p. 13.

⁹⁹ (1908) ‘<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/240674277>

¹⁰⁰ Ravis (1988) *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Victorian Government (1924) *op. cit.*

¹⁰² (1924) ‘One her own: the woman candidate’, *The Herald*, 10 June, p. 12.

¹⁰³ Ravis (1988) *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ (1924) ‘Publications received’, *The Horsham Times*, 30 May 1924, p. 8.

¹⁰⁶ (1924) ‘On her own: the woman candidate’, *The Herald*, 10 June, p. 12.

She called for a state-run hostel for unmarried mothers, where they could continue to work, and a residential school for ‘defective children’ to receive technical training.¹⁰⁷

During the campaign, Katz spoke at the Victorian Women’s Citizen Movement on the subject of ‘The Status of Women in the 20th Century’.¹⁰⁸ *The Argus* reported that she discussed how ‘Woman had been kept in subjection mainly through custom, which played a great part in the process of the human race’.¹⁰⁹ Katz advocated for women to ‘learn the value of combination’ and stated that she did not want a woman-made world, but ‘a world based on the attributes of both’.¹¹⁰

Katz’s main opponent was Edward Morley of the Nationalist party. In an uncommon offer for such a situation, Morely ‘invited [Katz] to tour the electorate in his motor car and speak off his platform’.¹¹¹ He was also critical of the ALP nominating her for a seat that she most likely could not win. He told *The Age* that:

... if all the members of the Labor Party were so anxious that the women should get into Parliament why was it that the men were so selfish that she had been given a hard seat to contest?¹¹²

The final result was Morley polling 5,086 votes to Katz’s 2,228.¹¹³ After the election, Katz said that she had managed to get more votes for Labor against a conservative politician than a man had at the previous election, but also did encounter voters who did not approve of a woman candidate.¹¹⁴ *The Geelong Advertiser* said that ‘from the outset her chance was hopeless’, but it isn’t clear if that was due to her being a female candidate, or the electorate being too conservative to elect a Labor candidate.¹¹⁵

Post-election endeavours

After the election defeat, Katz continued her work campaigning for various causes. While she never ran again for parliament, she did nominate for pre-selection in the 1931 election but later withdrew. Katz continued to work for the Women’s Central Organising Committee, serving as president in 1931, and in 1938 became the secretary of the Melbourne Ports Federal Campaign Committee.¹¹⁶

Her husband Fred, after several attempts at running for state and federal parliament, was elected to the Australian Senate in 1947, serving until 1951. He died in 1961, and Katz died three years later on 7 October 1964 at the age of 88. Their only daughter, Olive, continued to live in New South Wales and did not have any children.¹¹⁷

Today, a tree in Carlton Gardens commemorates the proclamation of women being able to stand for parliament.¹¹⁸ The Alicia Katz Prize is awarded to a school that makes an inspiring contribution to the Parliament Prize, an annual competition for school children run by the Victorian Parliament, through ‘their strong commitment to a diverse range of issues’.¹¹⁹

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ (1924) ‘Status of women. Equality of sex desired’, *The Argus*, 28 May, p. 9.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ (1924) ‘His lady opponent: Mr Morley offers Mrs. Katz use of motor car’, *The Herald*, 5 June 1924.

¹¹² (1924) ‘Vital issues explained. Dr. Maloney supports Mrs Katz’, *Geelong Advertiser*, 9 June, p. 3.

¹¹³ A. Carr (date unknown) ‘The twenty-eighth Parliament’, Psephos website.

¹¹⁴ (1924) ‘A woman candidate: Mrs/ Katz’s electioneering experience’, *The Age*, 16 July, p. 11.

¹¹⁵ (1924) ‘This week in Geelong. Principal events outlined’, *Geelong Advertiser*, 2 July, p. 11.

¹¹⁶ Ravis (1988) *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹⁸ Monument Australia (2024) ‘Women in Parliament Proclamation’, Monument Australia website.

¹¹⁹ Parliament of Victoria (2024) ‘Parliament Prize 2024 awards ceremony’, PoV website.

5 | Women in the Victorian Parliament today

The first woman was elected to the Victorian Parliament in 1933, some nine years after the successful passage of the Parliamentary Elections (Women Candidates) Act. The honour went to Millie Peacock in 1933, at a by-election for the seat of Allandale after the death of her husband, former Premier Sir Alexander Peacock. Peacock only served until the end of her term and only spoke in parliament once.¹²⁰

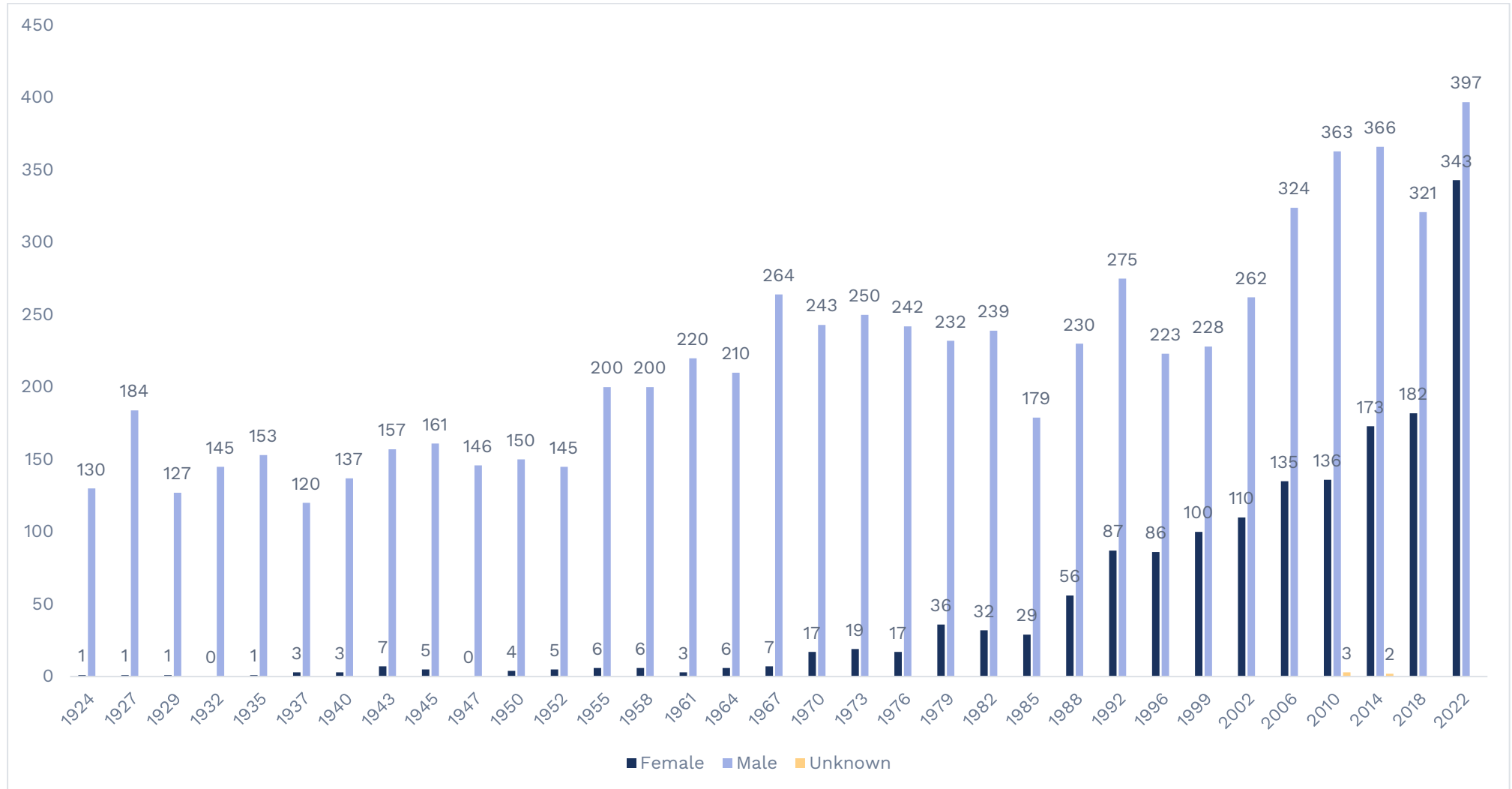
The first woman elected at a general election was Ivy Weber, in 1937, who served three terms as the Member for Nunawading as an Independent. The first woman to stand for election to the Legislative Council was Grace Muriel Stratton, in 1952. However, it wasn't until over 25 years later, in 1979, that the first women were elected to the Legislative Council—Gracia Baylor from the Liberal Party was elected for Boronia, and Joan Coxsedg from the Labor Party was elected for Melbourne West.

Since 1924, both the number of candidates and the number of female candidates at each election have increased dramatically. The 1924 Legislative Assembly election had only 131 candidates, only one of which was a woman. This increased to 740 total candidates at the 2022 election, 343 of which were women. The graphs below are intended to illustrate this growth.¹²¹

¹²⁰ R. Wright (1992) *A People's counsel: a history of the parliament of Victoria, 1856–1990*, South Melbourne, OUP, pp. 170–171.

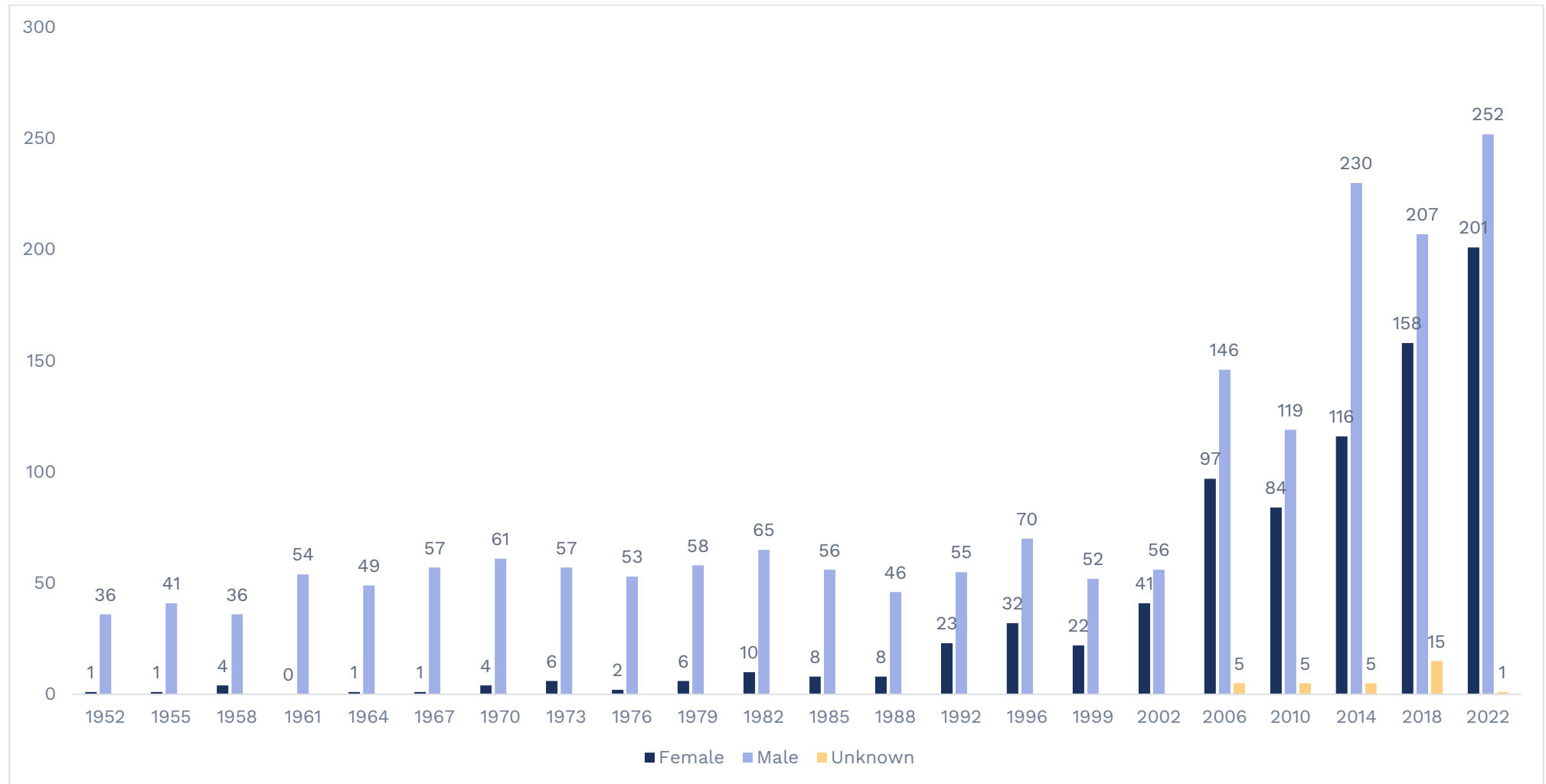
¹²¹ As election candidate data generally does not include gender identity, information on some candidates' genders was sourced through various publicly available sources and best estimates. Some have been drawn based on standard name usage (e.g. Mary for women and John for men), and generally accepted variations in spelling (e.g. Frances for women and Francis for men). For names where gender was not clear (e.g. Kim), we have attempted to verify a candidate's gender identity at the time of the election using their pronouns used in media articles, candidates' social media accounts and candidates' websites. Despite these efforts, a small number of candidates' genders are unconfirmed or may be incorrect.

Figure 1: Candidates standing for the Legislative Assembly at general elections, 1924–2022¹²²



¹²² A. Carr (date unknown) 'Victorian elections since 1843', Psephos website; M. Allinson (2011) *Early women candidates for Parliament, Victoria 1924-1970*, Balwyn, League of Women Voters Victoria.

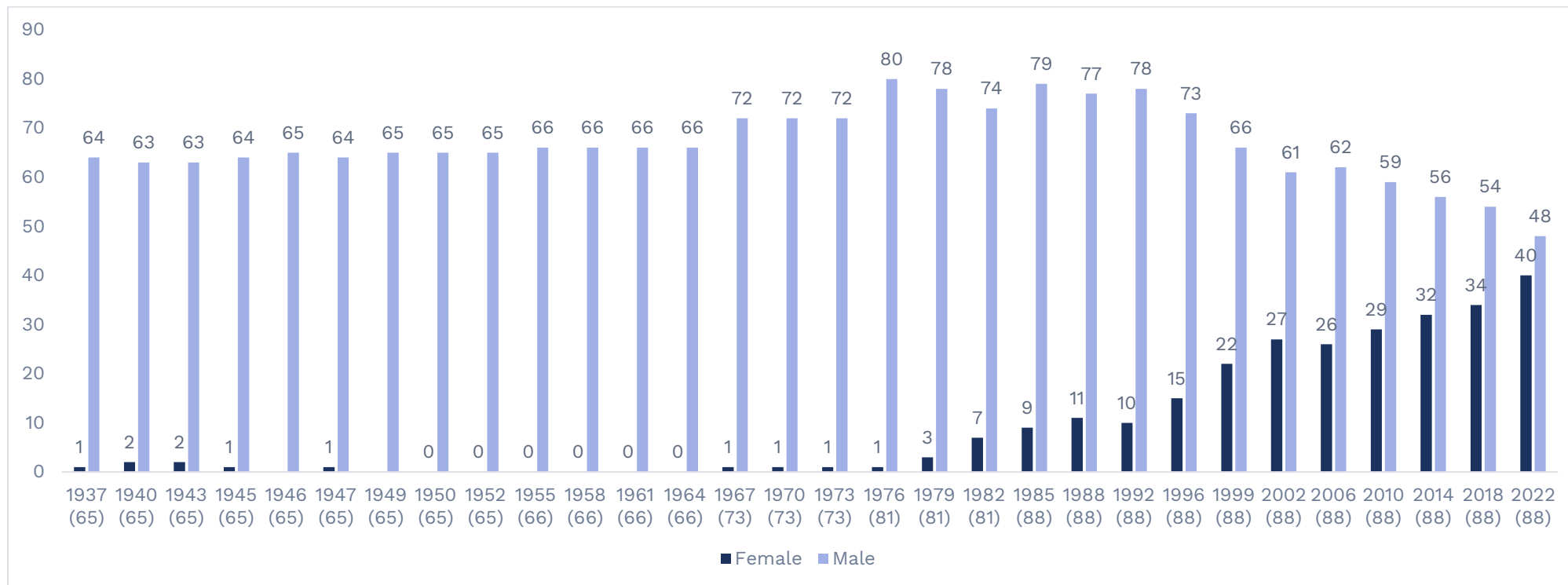
Figure 2: Candidates standing for the Legislative Council at general elections, 1952–2022¹²³



¹²³ *ibid.*

Figure 3: Members in the Legislative Assembly, 1937–2022¹²⁴

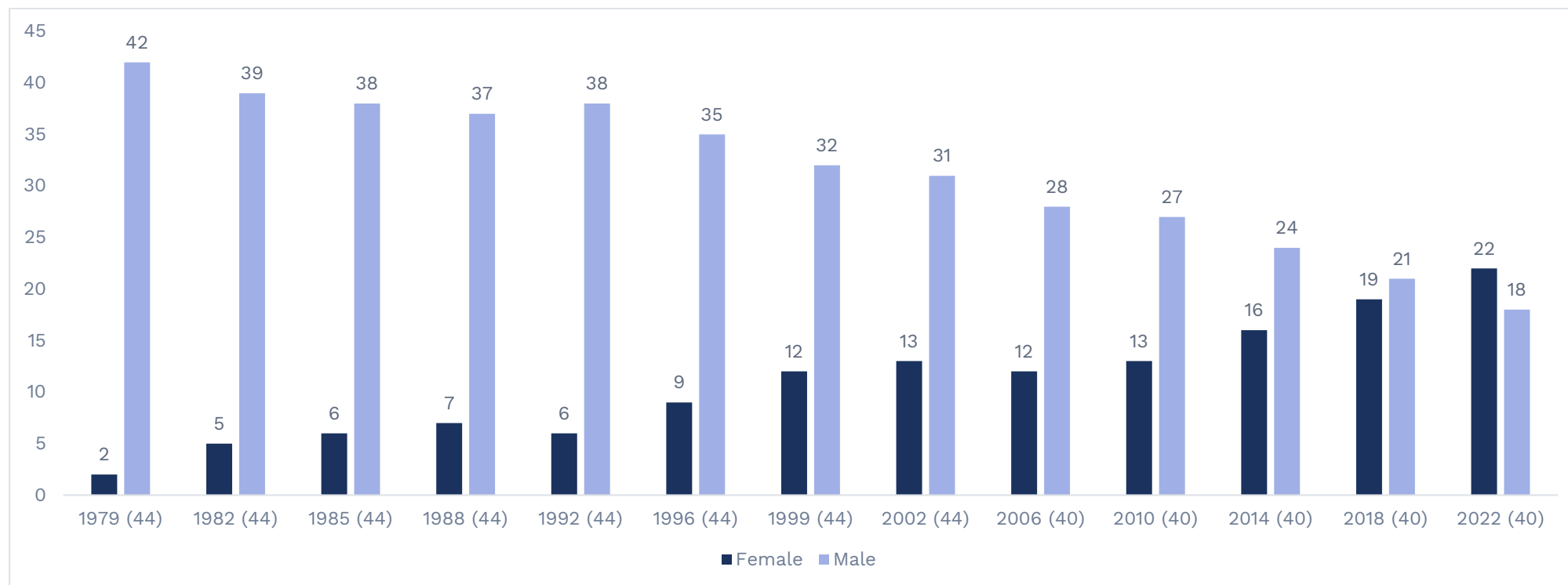
Both Millie Peacock (1933) and Fanny Brownbill (1938) both won their seats at by-elections. The graph below illustrates the number of women elected from *general elections* and does not illustrate changes to the composition of the Assembly due to resignation, death or by-election results. Forty women were elected at the 2022 general election; however, the current Legislative Assembly has 42 female members after Nicole Werner (Warrandyte) and Eden Foster (Mulgrave) won by-elections to replace Ryan Smith and Daniel Andrews, respectively.



¹²⁴ Allinson (2011) op. cit.; A. Carr (date unknown) op. cit.; C. Triscari (2022) *Two decades of representation in the Victorian Parliament*, Parliamentary Library & Information Service, Melbourne, Parliament of Victoria; (1981) *Victorian Parliamentary handbook: the 48th Parliament*, Melbourne, Parliament of Victoria; (1982) *Victorian Parliamentary handbook: the 49th Parliament*, Melbourne, Parliament of Victoria; C. Altis (1986) *Victorian Parliamentary handbook: the 50th Parliament*, Number 3, Melbourne, Parliament of Victoria; A. Jones (1989) *Victorian Parliamentary handbook: the 51st Parliament*, Number 4, Melbourne, Parliament of Victoria; B. Lesman (1992) *Victorian Parliamentary handbook: the 52nd Parliament*, Melbourne, The Library, Parliament of Victoria; G. Dunstan (1996) *Victorian Parliamentary handbook: the 53rd Parliament*, Number 6, Melbourne, Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Victoria; B. Skinner (2000) *Victorian Parliamentary handbook: the 54th Parliament*, Number 7, Melbourne, Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Victoria; (2004) *Victorian Parliamentary handbook: the 55th Parliament*, Number 8, Melbourne, Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Victoria; J. Piesse (2011) *Victorian Parliamentary handbook: the 57th Parliament*, Number 10, Melbourne, Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Victoria.

Figure 4: Members of the Legislative Council, 1979–2022¹²⁵

At the 2022 state election, for the first time more women were elected to the Legislative Council than men.



¹²⁵ *ibid.*

Other female firsts

| | Milestone | Name | Party | Electorate | Notes |
|------|---|-------------------------------|---|---|--|
| 1933 | First female Member of Parliament | Millie Peacock | United Australia Party | Allandale (1 November 1933 – 1 February 1935) | Peacock was elected unopposed at the Allandale District by-election on 11 November 1933. Her husband, Alexander Peacock, was the Member for Allandale until his death on 7 October 1922. |
| 1937 | First female Member of Parliament elected at a general election | Ivy Weber | Independent | Nunawading (1 October 1937 – 1 July 1943) | Weber resigned from the Victorian Parliament to contest the Federal Election in 1943. |
| 1979 | First female Members of the Legislative Council | Hilda Baylor and Joan Coxsedg | Liberal Party Australian Labor Party | Boronia (5 May 1979 – 1 March 1985) Melbourne West (5 May 1979 – 2 October 1992) | Baylor resigned in 1985 to run unsuccessfully for the Legislative Assembly seat of Warrandyte. |
| 1981 | First female Minister | Pauline Toner | Australian Labor Party | Greensborough (1 November 1977 – 28 February 1989) | Toner became the first female Cabinet Minister in Victoria when she was appointed the Minister for Community Welfare Services. She served in this role from 8 April 1982 to 14 March 1985. |
| 1990 | First female Premier | Joan Kirner | Australian Labor Party | Melbourne West (3 April 1982 – 30 September 1988) (Legislative Council) Williamstown (1 October 1988 – 27 May 1994) (Legislative Assembly) | Kirner was Premier from 10 August 1990 to 6 October 1992. |
| 2003 | First female Speaker | Judy Maddigan | Australian Labor Party | Essendon (30 March 1996 – 26 November 2010) | Maddigan was Speaker from 1 February 2003 to 31 December 2006. |

| | Milestone | Name | Party | Electorate | Notes |
|-------------|---|------------------------------|------------------------|---|--|
| 2003 | First female President | Monica Gould | Australian Labor Party | Doutta Galla (18 September 1993 – 24 November 2006) | Gould was President from 1 February 2003 to 31 December 2006. |
| 2017 | First female First Nations Member of the Legislative Assembly | Lidia Thorpe | Victorian Greens | Northcote (18 November 2017 – 19 December 2018) | After leaving the Victorian Parliament, Thorpe was elected to the Australian Senate in 2020. |
| 2020 | First female First Nations Member of the Legislative Council | Sheena Watt | Australian Labor Party | Northern Metropolitan (13 October 2020 – present) | Watt is currently the Parliamentary Secretary for both Emergency Services and Climate Action. |

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